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Vallejo's Restaurant an island of certainty

Lydia Martinez spends her days laboring in a tidy, aroma-filled restaurant on the eastern edge of downtown. It's a magical place. It truly is.

It's the rare destination where nothing changes.

Lydia has worked at Vallejo's Restaurant, 111 S. Corona St., since her mother, Paula, opened the doors in 1962. In the past 57 years, she's seen her hometown zoom from 75,000 to 475,000 residents. She's seen traffic jams invade her once-sleepy city. She's seen the arrival of dozens of Mexican dining competitors.

Change surrounds her, but she refuses to join this menacing trend.

Most afternoons, Lydia sits in the center of the kitchen in the same spot where Paula once sat. For decades, Paula rested in a doomed gray plastic chair, silently reading her gray Bible. Lydia rests in a black swivel chair, planning and remembering. Her mother loved this restaurant to the depths of her soul. The same love inhabits and dominates Lydia.

SEE RAMSEY • PAGE 6

Cello charity helps bring happiness to all involved

BY STEPHANIE EARLS
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When the 11-year-old son of a Colorado Springs veteran discovered his prized cello had been swiped on the Monday after Thanksgiving, his mom started a GoFundMe campaign and Mount Carmel Veterans Service Center reached out to local media for help spreading the word.

The Gazette's story about Brendon Bradley, his mom, Michele Williams, and the stolen cello ran Nov. 28. By the end of the week, Williams' crowdfunding campaign had surpassed its goal and about a dozen people had gotten in touch wanting to donate cellos. One of those instruments — an intermediate-sized version that Mike and Jandy Barentine's kids had learned to play on — turned out to be a

SEE CHARITY • PAGE 6

Parents test kids for vaping

As underage use of e-cigarettes increases, more teens being checked for nicotine

BY DEBBIE KELLEY
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With concerns about underage use of e-cigarettes rising to what the U.S. surgeon general calls epidemic levels, more parents are having their kids tested for nicotine.

Business is brisk at two independently franchised Any Lab Test

Now locations in Colorado Springs, said Terra Runyan, supervisor of the lab at 7828 N. Academy Blvd.

Testing teens for nicotine in their bodies is a new focus of the company, she said, which offers about 8,000 lab tests.

"We've had a lot of parents bring their children in," Runyan said. "It's

sad because children don't know it can lead to addiction."

Electronic cigarettes can be smoked, or vaped, in devices that are hard to detect because adults may be unfamiliar with the products.

It's not uncommon for middle and high school students to vape undetected in class, said Dacia Hudson,

program manager of El Paso County Public Health's Tobacco Education Prevention Partnership.

"Right now, Juul is the most popular product among the kids, and they literally look like a flash drive," she said. "So if a parent doesn't know

SEE VAPING • PAGE 8

Glimpse of history on smaller scale



DOUGAL BROWNLIE, THE GAZETTE

Randy Stratton, back left, son of USS Arizona survivor Don Stratton, in wheelchair, holds a piece of the ship where his father was standing during the Pearl Harbor attack to hand it to craftsman Jozef Szydlowski, back right, as a gift during a ceremony Saturday at the National Museum of World War II Aviation in east Colorado Springs. Szydlowski donated his 1/72nd-scale model of the WWII battleship, which took six years to build, to the museum to be part of the display honoring Stratton. For a photo gallery from the event, go to gazette.com.

Clinic gets a Medal of Honor of namesake

BY LIZ FORSTER
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The Department of Veterans Affairs' Floyd Lindstrom Clinic overflowed Saturday with current and former service members as a Medal of Honor dedicated to the clinic's namesake was delivered to the hospital.

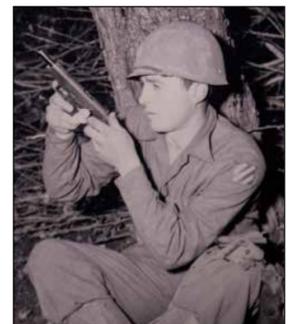
"I'm proud to have the medal displayed here so that the veterans that come through here

know the history of the man that this clinic is named after," said Duane Gill, the deputy director of the VA Eastern Colorado Health Care System. "It gives me chills being here."

Lindstrom, known as the "one-man army," was awarded the nation's highest medal for bravery during World War II for charging a German machine gun nest on Veterans Day,

Nov. 11, 1943, in southern Italy. Three months later, he died at Anzio, an ill-fated amphibious landing that eventually led to the capture of Rome.

While others from the city have earned the award, Lindstrom is the only one who grew up in Colorado Springs. Lindstrom had been awarded the Silver Star for



Pfc. Floyd Lindstrom, who grew up in Colorado Springs, is pictured in Italy just days before his death on Feb. 3, 1944, while fighting the Germans in World War II.

SEE MEDAL • PAGE 8

COURTESY OF KEITH LEMEE

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LOCAL & STATE

RAMSEY

FROM PAGE 3

She smiles as she remembers the day Paula decided to purchase a small grocery store and transform it into a Mexican restaurant.

"If it works, we'll stay there," Paula announced to Lydia. "If it doesn't, we'll close it up and forget about it."

Lydia laughs often, which explains why she's a bubbly and healthy 83-year-old. She's laughing now as she considers how wrong she was. Paula was fiercely optimistic about her restaurant's future. Lydia was quietly doubtful.

Many of us, including Lydia, have been challenged and blessed by a simple life truth: Mom is always right.

"I can't believe it," Lydia says. "I'm still here. I love it."

The restaurant is thriving. Lydia is helped by a few family members, including son Phillip and brother Dave, but she reigns as the beating heart of Vallejo's, where she works 65-70 hours a week.

Despite its longevity, Vallejo's remains somewhat of a Springs secret, largely due to city planners who cut Corona Street off from access to Pikes Peak Avenue. A diner must take a circuitous route that includes a turn on East Cucharas Street and then a left on Corona, where a glass door to good Mexican food beckons.

Jim Clamp, a Springs native, has made this drive for 25 years. He usually orders a small combo with tamale, taco, rice and beans.

"The food is going to be good," Clamp says. "It's exceptionally good. It looks like what you get somewhere else, but when you taste it, it's not. It's the real home-cooked stuff. Not anything frozen and heated up. It's the opposite of that. She really knows what she's doing, and it's fresh. I like it when it's



Vallejo's Restaurant is tucked into a corner on Corona Street in downtown Colorado Springs.

bubbling hot on the plate." Clamp pauses.

He's talking at his west-side home about Vallejo's but wishes he were eating at his favorite restaurant.

"The food is the thing," he says. "It makes me hungry just talking about it."

We dwell in an era of copy-cat restaurants. If you enter a typical American dining spot while wearing a blindfold, you might take your first look-around and guess it was one of many franchise establishments. They all look the same.

A few restaurants, improved by age and owned by families, defy this sameness.

Lydia enjoys eating at other long-established Colorado restaurants, ones that have stared down bland, look-alike challengers for decades, ones that decline to bend to fads.

"Those little restaurants, wherever you go, are the best," she says, speaking the truth and nothing but.

She remembers the day Vallejo's opened in 1962. The minister from her mother's Apostolic church blessed the fresh business endeavor with a prayer. Paula, a devout Christian, refused to sell alcohol in the restaurant, and

Lydia remains true to her wishes.

For 28 years, until 1990, Paula cooked savory meals and pondered the truths found in her gray Bible. When she died at 88, the family talked seriously about closing the restaurant.

Lydia responded with an emphatic no.

"It's ours," she said. "It's mine. I'm staying. I'm not going to break up the restaurant."

Vallejo's and Lydia endured. She's fortunate, and she knows it. She spends her days producing joy. For herself, and for others.

"I got all these people hooked on this food," she says, a gleeful bounce in her voice.

A few years after Paula's death, someone took a blazing pan of tamales off a burner and, fearing sizzled hands, placed the pan on the first available perch.

It was Paula's gray plastic chair, which doubled as the restaurant's throne.

"The chair melted!" Paula says, eyes growing wide.

Soon, a new chair arrived, a black throne where a diligent woman plots the future of a restaurant with a grand past.



PHOTOS BY JERILEE BENNETT, THE GAZETTE
Lydia Martinez has kept Vallejo's Restaurant alive and thriving for 57 years. She started the restaurant with her mother, Paula Vallejo, whose portrait hangs on the wall behind her.

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- Shristi Pokharel, Military Spouse



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CHARITY

FROM PAGE 3

perfect fit for Bradley, who is on the autism spectrum and uses music to help express his emotions.

The cascade of goodwill — cello charity, if you will — didn't stop there, however.

"There were reverberations. Good reverberations," said Jim Freeman, whose wife, Pam, was among those offering to donate a used cello. "There's always a story behind each musical instrument. It's really nice to get those backstories."

The backstory of 12-year-old Cheyenne Brown's cello is more of a back-symphony, with many parts and players, a guest star, and a coda that began last October, when North Middle School community liaison Marilyn Eggleston reached out to the needy families with whom she works, as she has every fall for the last 30 years.

"I ask them, do you want a basket? I ask them to list their kids, their sizes and what they want for Christmas," said Eggleston, who also asks that participants keep gift requests realistic, and under \$30. "The form came back in for Cheyenne's family and it was pretty right on, with Legos, a hoodie, a few other things ... but Dad had also put on there that Cheyenne really wants a cello."

Knowing the chances were slim, Eggleston nonetheless added the "dream wish" to Cheyenne's tag bound for the "giving tree" at St. Paul's Catholic Church.

On a Sunday in early December, a few days after reading the story about Brendon Bradley, Lee Ann Nelson plucked Cheyenne Brown's tag. Then she called The Gazette.

"I don't know a thing about cellos, but I saw the story and read that there had been multiple offers of cellos for the boy," Nelson said. "This little



STEPHANIE EARLS, THE GAZETTE
Colorado Springs School District 11 Superintendent Michael Thomas presents a "dream wish" cello, donated by Jim and Pam Freeman, to North Middle School sixth-grader Cheyenne Brown before Christmas. "Being able to bring a smile to a child's face is the best feeling and even more heart-warming over the holidays," Thomas said.

girl was asking for pants and a shirt, but I thought I'd see if any of the people wanting to donate an instrument might be willing to pass one on to this little girl."

Indeed, there were.

A "recreational" cellist who still plays in a quartet, Pam Freeman bought the first of her two cellos years ago when she was in graduate school in Virginia. She and her husband, Jim, got in touch with The Gazette after seeing Bradley's story. They wanted to pass the instrument on to a young musician who would use and appreciate it, but Pam's full-sized cello turned out to be a little too big for Bradley.

A 12-year-old girl, though? That might be a perfect fit.

Nelson spoke with the Freemans, then connected them with Marilyn Eggleston, to coordinate the transfer and answer a few questions about the young cellist who'd be getting Pam's instrument.

"They wanted to know if Cheyenne was very serious about music," said Eggleston. "I spoke with the orchestra director at her school, who said Cheyenne was really into her music, and though she only took it up at the beginning of

sixth grade, she's already in the honor band."

The 'tween was playing a full-sized instrument, so Pam's wouldn't be too large.

"I went to the Freeman's house and had quite the conversation with Jim. ... I invited them to one of her concerts, and brought the cello back to school to wrap it up for our big giveaway this year," Eggleston said.

That giveaway, to 270 at-risk children around the Springs, plays out in a frenzy of activity the day after school lets out for Christmas break. Most families stop by to pick up their gifts; the Brown family couldn't, so Eggleston was preparing to dispatch a delivery to their home when the new District 11 superintendent, Michael Thomas, strode up to ask if he could lend a hand.

"Oh, my gosh, talk about timing," said Eggleston, whose husband, dressed as Santa Claus, tagged along to take photos. "It was our feel-good moment of this year's giveaway. Cheyenne wasn't even supposed to be home, but lo and behold she was there. Everything worked out. The stars aligned perfectly for this to happen."